

## Mr. Ford's Page



**T**IMES of piping prosperity are often bad for business. Strange as it may sound, this statement will appear very plain and true upon a little consideration. We may say what we please about the business conditions which have hit the country during the last two months, but the real damage was done when everybody said that everything was lovely and the goose hung high.

By the same token, this period of depression through which we have been going has been good for business. The best thing that could have happened—it did not happen too soon. Business is on a better basis today than it was three months ago; it will be on a better basis next month than it would have been had not a halt been called.

These are simple ideas, but they are worth turning over.

You can see the good effects of poor business by just looking at the stores, the corner stores and the big downtown concerns. It was not long ago that the ordinary frugal buyer was somewhat in contempt. Clerks caught the contagion of the profiteers, and it was "Buy it or leave it" almost wherever you went. The morale of salespeople slumped at a terrific rate, and that is a pretty serious thing for business.

Not so very long ago the coal merchant sat in his office with the air of a king dispensing favors. His attitude in many cases was, "I don't know whether I will sell you or not—I'll think it over." It was bad for him and for his customers. When any business man in any line of business becomes independent of the public, or even thinks he is, it is a calamity for his business.

In some industries all that has remained for salesmen and managers to do during the last few years has been to take orders and deposits, and adopt that air of, "We may let you have it in about six months—if you deposit enough now." Orders came without effort. Customers were doing all the clamoring and worrying. Whereas once it was the customer who favored the merchant by dealing with him, conditions changed until it was the merchant who favored the customer by selling to him.

Now all that is bad for business. Monopoly is bad for business. Profiteering is bad for business. The lack of necessity to hustle is bad for business. Business is never so good and sound and healthy as when, like a chicken, it must do a certain amount of scratching for what it gets.

Things were coming too easily. There was a let-down of the principle that an honest relation ought to obtain between values and prices. The public no longer had to be "catered to." There was even a "public be damned" attitude in many places.

It was intensely bad for business, all that kind of prosperity.

But there has come a change. The era of rampant prosperity so-called died down. The reckoning-up time came. Customers no longer besieged the doors. Indeed, customers have a memory and they remembered that in the heyday of trade they were treated rather cavalierly. Many merchants are discovering today that he was a wise man who was just as anxious to serve and please his customers when trade was brisk, as he is now when trade is a little slower.

The best point of all is that this period of slackness is showing up the damage which false prosperity did to business ethics and efficiency. A good business is one that can sail along comfortably in the face of adverse gales. Since 1914 almost any fool could do business. There was more business to be done than there were business devices with which to do it.

It will be generally conceded that the period of so-called prosperity had a very deleterious effect on salesmanship. Salesmanship is more than taking orders, but that is about all it has amounted to during the last six or seven years.

When the rush of prosperity began to dwindle and then to cease, and it became necessary to pull in the collar rather than hold back in the breeching, then was the test. It was found in many cases that salesmanship had softened. The easy-chair and order-taking habit had demoralized it. It could not stand for the rough, hard work of going out and being refused, and being refused again.

So, it has been a blessing for business all round, this period of depression; it has shown up the flabby spots. It has disclosed those people who were content comfortably to watch the wheels go round, but were not very handy in getting out and making the wheels go round.

We were getting to a place where no one cared about costs except the consumer—and he didn't count. Not only did no one make a move toward reduction of costs, they actually dreaded to think of the time when it would have to come. Business lay abed, like a boy who hates to get up and go into the cold barn to do the chores. Business was soft with too much good living.

Nothing has happened in our history to render out of date the business philosophy of Benjamin Franklin. Poor Richard's Almanac is still the best business compendium. The old American virtues of thrift and industry have no successors or substitutes. Business success is still a matter of making friends by service, and not a case of cornering necessitous people in such a way that they will have to come to you.

Free trade still exists in the local sense. Trade will always remain free regardless of monopoly or combine. Trade gravitates toward the man who has the desire and the will to please and serve those who need what he can give. When a man gets bigger than his business, when he begins to think that he has got things coming his way and therefore may relax, he is in a bad state.

Every successful business is troubled with that sort of disease—complete satisfaction and relaxation. It should be ruthlessly exterminated. If this disease strikes the principal leader of the business, he should retire or be removed as quickly as anyone else would be. That kind of success is very bad for business.

Young men have been asking for a number of years whether there was any possible chance for them to start for themselves in a world which is apparently so completely organized. Sometimes the answers were encouraging, sometimes not.

But now they can see for themselves. It is any man's game now who will play it according to the old-time rule of "value received." A business man is a servant, and when he gets too rich, or too high and mighty for that, then something happens, and someone else gets

a chance. And that is occurring on a large scale now. Business is weeding out the over-ripe ones.

Thus it comes, reasonably enough, that a period of bad business is really a good thing for business, because it drives business back to its sounder fundamentals of honor in negotiations, quality in merchandise, and willingness in service.

It is a splendid lesson for the younger group of business men. They will keep their heads better during the next rise of commercial prosperity. They will be taught to trust more confidently in those principles of business which are as indispensable in brisk times as in slow times.

And, on the whole, it has been an easy lesson. It might have been much more severe. It will have been worth all it cost to all classes of society, if only we have sense enough to remember it.

We have been influenced too much by the grab-bag philosophy. We are making careers, and that is incompatible with the practice of "getting while the getting is good." Such getting is not good for long.

***TOO long a stretch of good business is bad for business. A period of depression and slackness, such as the country has been having, is really good for business. Trade can come too easily. The habit of sitting in an office and filling orders and counting money is the worst one that can be fastened on a business man. He ought to have just enough difficulty to make him dig. Orders have been coming so fast in America that we have forgotten how to get out and sell. Flabby and soft organizations did not know how to meet the changed conditions of the past three months. Now, everybody must get out and hustle, and that is one of the best things that has occurred in the United States since 1914.***